Responsibility
Luke 13:1-9
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John M. Buchanan

Ernest Campbell, minister of Riverside Church in New York City, tells the story of a juvenile criminial who was brought to trial in Toronto a few years ago. He brought to the bar of justice an unbelievably bad record including murder, rape and armed robbery. His defense was based on the fact that he had come from a broken home, that he was a high school drop-out, that he had been influenced badly by the wrong group of friends and that his personality was deeply introverted.

During the trial a cartoon appeared in one of the Toronto daily papers. It portrayed a boy standing before the bench, looking up at the judge and saying, "Here I stand, I can do no other."

Those were the words of Martin Luther, you will remember, as he testified on his own behalf before the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, at the Diet of Worms. They became the rallying slogan of the Protestant Reformation, and symbolized a new awareness of man's dignity and integrity and responsibility. They were used in this cartoon, however, to indicate how far we have come from that heroic gesture 450 years ago.

The topic I would have you consider this morning is a difficult and controversial one. It presents itself to us in many forms in our common life. Who bears responsibility for the juvenile delinquent? Who bears responsibility for the behavior of an angry, black militant? Who is responsible for the 18 year old A.D.C. mother who has just born her third illegitimate child? Who is responsible for Leutenant Calley's behavior, or Sirhan Sirhan or Lee Harvey Oswald? Who is responsible for Angela Davis? She - us - or everyone together?

It's treacherous going, and we are not helped at all by simple-minded solutions which attempt either to make an individual solely responsible for his behavior, or totally unaccountable for what he does. The truth, as usual,

falls somewhere in the middle.

As we have become more and more sophisticated in the Social Sciences - the disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology and politcal science, the locus of responsibility has slowly shifted from the individual to society, family or the general sociological environment. We know the heredity has a great deal to do with the eventual outcome of personality development. We know that all sorts of environmental factors come into play as well: we can document the effect the filial relationship from birth on, has on the world view and behavior of people. We know the economics plays a part: that social conditions do leave their mark. We know that history is important: that there is a substantial difference between coming of age in 1971 and, say, the quiet days of centuries past. It does matter that we live in a world over which hangs the Damocles Sword of nuclear war.

No sensitive person can dismiss all of this as he contemplates the locus of responsibility. In a very real way we do bear common responsibility for the life behavior of every man. And to ignore the fact that an Angela Davis is black and from Alabama and witnessed the bombing death of four young friends in the Sunday School of the First Baptist Church of Birmingham is the heigth of insensitivity.

And yet - and it is an important "and yet" - the sociological conditions surrounding an individual's personality development are not the whole story. For, if we are simply the products of other, external forces, we are not only irresponsible - but also not free - and not human. The abdication of personal responsibility is - in essence - the abdication of manhood. "Here I stand. I can do no other" - means - I am a product of fate - I am not accountable - I am not a man. Rollo May, distinguished psychiatrist and author, has identified one of the major problems of our culture as "the crisis of will." We have, says May, all too often excused ourselves and blamed someone or something else for what we do, think and are.

So the going is treacherous and we must proceed with great care and even greater integrity. For it is, admittedly, very comforting, to know that, when I choose, I may blame others for what I am.

Jesus told a little story once that is right to the point. There are two major ideas that keep emerging in the teachings of our Lord - Grace and Demand. on the one hand the love of God for all men; on the other hand the imperative laid on the heart of every man by God. On the one hand the good news that God accepts us as we are; on the other hand command that we become something more than we are. The two are in tension in the Gospel: and it is interesting that whenever Jesus addressed himself to his own people - the Jews - it was the latter - the demand - that he emphasized. Thus, the little story of the Fig tree.

The fig tree had a lot of factors going for it. Located in a favored spot in the vineyard it had the sun and sky to itself. Object of care and pruning - its branches became lush and green. There was one thing wrong, however: it wasn't producing any figs. So the owner of the vineyard, after three years of waiting ordered it cut down. The gardener interceded - one more chance; a little more pruning and fertilizing; one more season to prove itself. And the period of grace was granted. The tree got a second chance. Jesus left the story hanging there for dramatic effect. For he was not really talking about a fig tree at all; he was addressing himself to men and women: to the whole nation of Israel. And the ending of the parable would be written by them - as they responded to him.

The function of a fig tree is to produce figs. If it does not perform its function it has no reason to take up space in a vineyard. The function of Israel was to bear witness to God. They were partners in covenant with God. They had been blessed with a galaxie of leaders unequalled in the history of the world: Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Amos, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth. Their function was to prosecute the case for Almighty God

before the court of world history: to be his special people. Their privilege as chosen people meant responsible people. And now, in their history, God had acted in an ultimate way. The messiah had come - and in coming had laid the imperative of responsibility directly upon them.

The meaning in that for us is very simply stated. Privilege always means responsibility. We are accountable for who we are and what we do. "Here I stand. I can do no other" is not really the truth about us at all. Rather, in Biblical terms it is always, "Here I stand. But I could be other than what I am."

Careful insight teaches us to go easy on the Jews at this point. For centuries Christianity has provided the ideological rational for anti-semitism - by blaming the Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. And only recently, after twenty long centuries, have we mustered the integrity to confess that they are no more guilty than anyone else: that we should have acted the same way were we in their position. After all, there are good, sound, political, sociological and psychological reasons for their rejection of Jesus Christ. Their behavior can be explained - just as we are quite able to explain our own timidity and unfaithfulness as our faith comes in conflict with major forces in our own culture.

But the Biblical witness keeps returning, time and time again, to the cutting edge of personal responsibility. We are men as we bear responsibility. We exercise our God -given humanity as we hold no one accountable for ourselves but ourselves.

Now, let's think about ourselves. It is my observation that all of us have an incredible ability to rationalize our own behavior - while at the same time holding others accountable for their behavior. Geraldine says, "The Devil made me do it"; which is one of our historic excuses. On the other hand Dagwood is at least honest, when he says "there are some urges I can't resist" as he lets his sleeping friend Herb have it with the hose.

We are very adept at wriggling out from under responsibility, but demanding from others what we are unwilling to produce in ourselves. A noted Welsh churchman, D. R. Davies, in his book "In Search of Myself", puts it this way: "Having a grudge fostered my native pride and egotism. In later life, the fact of this childhood's poverty enabled me to justify myself in holding on to self-will and pride. It formed me in the habit of shifting responsibility for the failures and disasters of life onto other shoulders. My poverty violated the first principle of a really sound education, which according to Kierkegaard, is to allow the soul to be molded by responsibility. It was my father's fault, or somebody's fault, that I had only a halfpenny a week. By the time I had reached manhood, I had come to assume that the blame had come to lay somewhere else - never with myself. I had to pass through an insanity of suffering before I realized the fundamental moral law of personal responsibility." [p 20-21]

The truth is that you and I are the products of both our conditioning, heredity, environment - and - personal will - or sense of responsibility. The truth is that if we fail as parents to teach that individuals are accountable for their behavior, we have seriously failed our children. The truth is that if we can find a hundred and one reasons why our marriage is not harmonious, or our sex life not satisfactory, or our personal relationships frustrating, without ever bearing personal responsibility, we are in serious and permanent trouble.

The truth about us is that each one of us is a mixed bag of heredity, environment and responsibility. There are "givens" about each of us. We are not, in fact, equal in experience, training, talents, intelligence. There is a lot about us that can be explained by where we've been in life, and what has happened to us along the way. But to lean on this alone - is the greatest cop-out of all. And I would address that with equal conviction to the young, the middle-aged, and the elderly.

One writer suggests a rule of thumb which I believe has a lot of merit. "In understanding other people, look to the factors that conditioned them; in

understanding yourself, take full responsibility". [E. Campbell, Plain Words for Troubled Times. United Presbyterian Series. p. 20]

It all comes to a head, I believe, as each of us confronts the radical claim of the Gospel, and the maker of the claim, Jesus Christ. I spend a significant amount of time talking with people about the church; members who are not attending it; non-members who are contemplating joining it. And while I am aware that most people don't connect their feelings about Jesus Christ with their behavior vis a vis Bethany Presbyterian Church, I do encounter an array of excuses for not attending or not joining that fairly boggles the mind. The two most popular excuses which are told with straight face, time and time again, pretty clearly define the responsibility crisis in Christian Faith. At one home I will be told that a man doesn't come to church because, as a boy, his parents forced him to go every Sunday, and the bad taste of that coerced piety has never left him. So - thanks, but no thanks - and it's really my parents fault, you see. At the next home I will be told, with equal sincerity, that a man doesn't go to church because his parents never went, and he never got in the habit of going. So - thanks, but no thanks - and it's really my parents fault, you see.

Poor mom and dad. It's a closed case. No matter what they did, or didn't do, the individual can shovel the responsibility to their shoulders, and remain in bed on Sunday morning, with conscience clear. Well, that's a cop-out: I know it is; and I think those who try to use it sense it is too. But it is precisely where a lot of people are in life generally, and in relationship to Jesus Christ, specifically. It is a denial of integrity and manhood and an abdication of responsibility.

The disturbing thing about Jesus Christ is that he always makes men responsible and accountable. He did in Galilea - and he continues to do it today. God's coming in a man, into the common life of men, makes all of us responsible - we must come to some conclusion about him, and about our lives in relationship

to him.

That's disturbing, and upsetting: but it is also profoundly good. It says that you and I are terribly and totally free. It says that within our grasp is full manhood, expressed in a decision and commitment to Jesus Christ.

We are free. We are accountable. We are responsible. To the degree we embrace those three - freedom, accountability, responsibility - we are truly men.

Amen.

Our father, each of us has secret reasons for what we do. Grant us courage to be honest with ourselves. Grant us strength to assume responsibility for who we are; through him to whom we are ultimately accountable, ever Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.